



Open My Heart:

Living Jewish Prayer with Rabbi Jonathan Slater

Hazzan Joanna Dulkan

JONATHAN:

Shalom. This is Rabbi Jonathan Slater, and welcome to “Open My Heart: Living Jewish prayer”, a Prayer Project Podcast of the Institute for Jewish Spirituality. Together, we will investigate how personal prayer, in its many forms, is an important part of Jewish spirituality. Each Monday and Friday, we will offer a different practice, led by a different person, all praying from the heart. Today we are blessed to have with us has on Joanna token was a beloved and dear student and friend. Hey Joanna, I'm so happy to have you here with us today. Would you tell us a little bit about yourself?

JOANNA:

Sure. It's wonderful to be here. Thank you for having me, Jonathan. I am a Cantor. I currently serve Congregation Adath Jeshurun in Minnetonka, Minnesota, which has been wonderful. This will be my fourth year here. Jonathan and I actually met in New Rochelle, , where his mother of blessed memory, was a member of my very first congregation. So it's been a while. I was in the second cohort of cantors of IJS, and I still feel very connected to my brother and sisters in that group. And I'm very grateful for that time that I had. And I also do a little bit of work with the Cantor's Assembly. And I compose music, and I love working with children of all ages and singing with them. And I'm really, at this moment, missing singing with them at camp, which is probably my favorite thing in the world. And I'm also almost done with my yoga teacher training certification, which has been an interesting new thing this year. So lots, lots going on. And I just love what I do ,and I feel very blessed to be able to do the work that I do.

JONATHAN:

That sounds like a lot. And that's really great. So I'm really excited to be part of your practice and I'm going to turn things over to you and thank you for sharing your prayer now.

JOANNA:

So, for me, my prayer practice is centered around cultivating self-awareness, and groundedness, and connection to something larger than myself. My prayer practice is part of my larger practice, physical practices, and other creative practices. And for me, when I sit, and when I truly am quiet, as quiet as my mind can get, I'm able to really listen deeply to what's inside. And I'm really able to really connect myself with something deeper and greater. And so I, I think of it, I think of my, of my being as a deep well, and when I have the opportunity to practice, I take a big heavy stone off of the well, and I'm able to see what's in there, right? So running around and in my life, you have to put a stone on the well, because otherwise too much is going to come out. So it's, it's my metaphor. It's such that when I have that, I have to make that time to, to roll the stone off the well and see what comes up.

And so, in this practice of self-awareness and connection with something greater, I'm able to tap into and be conscious of the things that I need. And being in a position where I am serving others, it's often hard to put myself and my needs right first. And so I have to actually make a time where I think about the things that I need, and am I getting them or not. And the point isn't to come up with solutions and fix them, but just to be with that, and be in that space where I can listen deeply. And so how this plays out is I find a really comfortable place, a comfortable position. And for me, I have a really, really comfy zafu, a pillow that I, I set up against a wall, so I can lean my back against the wall. And I sit on the floor and I'm able to bend my knees in a way that's really comfortable and just allow myself to come to a really comfortable seated position.

And I just tap in, and I'm able, I sometimes I actually do imagine and visualize a stone being rolled off a well. Sometimes I imagine myself sort of adrift in, in the, in waves, and getting myself to a space where I can really listen deeply, and ground into myself, and ground out towards the world. Or tune out the world, I guess. And so, when I'm able to do that, I can truly look right at what's under this stone in this well. And very often what surfaces is a melody, a song. And the quietest my mind gets is, there's always a song there. There's always a melody. There's always a *niggun*, and there's always something bubbling. And so instead of trying to push it away, and trying to shush it or quiet it, I found that the best way is just sort of to climb on top and ride, right, ride with that melody. And sometimes a melody will just come to me. And the words of the liturgy sometimes attach themselves to the melody, and then I can follow that musical mantra throughout my practice.

So my most recent mantra that I'm working with is from the morning blessings. And it's from the end of one of the *Birkhot Hashachar*, from the end of one of the blessings:



Sheh'asah li kol tzorki, שְׁעָשָׂה לִי כָּל צָרָתִי, who has made for me, who has provided for me all that I need. So I'm first just going to settle in and breathe and allow this music, this mantra to be voiced.

[Music] Hmm. Hmm.... *Sheh'asah li kol tzorki, שְׁעָשָׂה לִי כָּל צָרָתִי*;

You've made for me all I need.

When he *niggun* opened me up and it allowed me to go into that place of inquiry and curiosity about what it is that I do need. And then I realized that I probably have it, that I had it. And where's the awareness coming from that I probably have it. Because it's not about what I want. It's about what I need. And this awareness that this, what I need, whatever that is, that *tzorkhi* comes from the source, comes from the Holy one. And so, I have what I need, and God made it just for me, it's mine. It's, it's, it's what, what was made just for me. And that realization is something that I need to, that I often need to remind myself of. And when I go into that quiet space, and I'm going to do the chant again, except this time it's going to be internal, so you're not going to hear it, but it's still going inside my head. So first the vocalization, and then this riding the waves of the *niggun*, right, holding on to it as, as it happens. I think energetically for me, it's, it's very similar to actually voicing. It's just an internal voicing.

So, I invite you in there with me.....

By the way, there's a whole band in my head. So I hear percussion. I hear different voices. I hear harmonies. I hear it as a round. I hear a bass. I mean, I hear the whole thing. It's like a whole orchestra going, a whole band jamming. And as I'm talking, as I'm explaining what I'm hearing, and explaining what I'm seeing, the music is still playing in rhythm and in time. And I'm just enjoying it, and riding with it.

And as I'm riding the wave of this *niggun*, and the energy of this music, is filling my being, I have to slow the movement, and slow the brainwaves in order to come back into a grounded place. You know, put away the, the bass and the percussion and the harmonies, and just come back to the stillness, the still small voice of this one little mantra. It's like the light bulb on the stage, right? The empty stage with the one light bulb. To cut through all of the wants, and cut through all of the noise, and just focus on what it is that I need, and the realization that I have it.



And what keeps arising is a need that maybe is just a want. And what arises is a need that I hadn't been able to be in touch with before, just to notice it. And I'll now breathe one last, really deep, nice, delicious breath. I know that I can come back here whenever I need (as long as no one's needing me for anything). And I opened my eyes.

JONATHAN:

That was Joanna Dulkan leading us in their personal prayer practice, which was so inspiring. And for which we are grateful.

We hope that you found this practice meaningful. You can use the recording as support if you choose to engage in the practice yourself and we encourage you to do so. First use the practices offered in this episode, following the instructions given you may wish to practice with the presenter several times to get a feel for the practice yourself over time, you will likely find your own inspiration and take the practice in new directions, which will be great for you and for the Jewish people. Together, we can shift the paradigm around prayer from going to services, to prayer as a spiritual practice.

We are grateful to Judith silver for giving us permission to use her song "Open" at the start of our show. You can find it and more of her music at judithsilver.com. We are also grateful to Elana Arian for giving us permission to use her song, "Ken Yehi Ratzon", as our closing. You can learn more about Elana's music at elanaarian.com. For more information about "Open My Heart" and the Institute for Jewish Spirituality, please visit us at jewishspirituality.org. Shalom. Until next time we pray that, you remain healthy and to safe.

